

Auditor: Range probe nearly done

By Tom Eldred
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DOVER — State Auditor R. Thomas Wagner Jr. says an investigation into the closed Delaware State Police firing range near Smyrna is almost finished and that an initial closed-door report to legislators could be presented within days.

"We are closer to being done than I ever thought humanly possible," Mr. Wagner said Wednesday. "We have one or two more sets of interviews to finish up. After that we will be able to make our conclusions."

The \$3.3 million indoor shooting range, billed as state of the art when it opened in 1998, was closed by the state police in March after members of a recruit class complained of nosebleeds, headaches and a "penny" taste in the mouths.

Tests conducted by the state's Facilities Management division revealed considerably higher than standard levels of lead, copper and zinc contaminants in various sections of the range, including shooting areas and administrative offices.

Although state police operate the range, Facilities Management has ultimate responsibility for the

structure, as it has with all state-owned buildings.

Mr. Wagner said he wants to give members of the legislative Bond Bill Committee an oral update on the probe before the General Assembly's current session ends June 30.

He said he would wait, however, until the committee's co-chair, Rep. Roger P. Roy, R-Limestone Hills, returns to work.

Rep. Roy was hospitalized Monday with an infection and was expected to remain in the hospital through the end of the week.

Gov. Ruth Ann Minner and Controller General Russell T. Larson asked Mr. Wagner to investigate the range situation in April after Rep. Roy requested a financial history of the range, which has been troubled by design flaws and environmental concerns since it opened.

Rep. Roy requested the information after Rep. William A. Oberle, R-Newark, asked the



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bipartisan Bond Bill Committee to hold a special hearing on how the original design was selected and the process used to award the architectural contract.

As part of their probe, investigators interviewed current and former state police range personnel and Smyrna-based JAED Corp., which was awarded the architectural and engineering contract by Facilities Management in the mid-1990s.

JAED had not previously designed an indoor small arms range.

Mr. Wagner said investigators also traveled to Norfolk, Va., to interview representatives at Clark Nexsen Inc., an experienced range designer that was bypassed in the bid selection process despite first-place rankings by three state police officers on Facilities Management's five-member selection committee.

Although Clark Nexsen was hired by JAED to serve as a consultant on the project, company officials said they had minimum influence on the final design.

JAED, on the other hand, told the Delaware State News the design was almost entirely based on an earlier version supplied by Clark Nexsen.

Mr. Wagner would not reveal specifics of his investigators' interviews with Clark Nexsen, saying only that the information collected from the Virginia-based firm was valuable.

He said he wants the oral report to the Bond Bill Committee to be conducted behind closed doors because of the possibility of litigation.

"The potential for lawsuits is certainly there," Mr. Wagner said. "We have to be careful at this point about that."

At least three state police troopers who worked full-time at the range before it was shut down complained of permanent health problems in prepared statements to the auditor's investigation team.

Mr. Wagner said a written report would be shared with the public at a later date.

"Right now, our conclusions could go one of several ways, depending on how these last interviews go," he said.

"We want to go back and interview some of the initial people that we talked to in the first place."

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